



Latino teens have healthier summer

by Elizabeth Kumru

Small changes make big differences.

That's one of the messages 13 Latino teens spread this summer to raise awareness of healthier lifestyle choices.

They call themselves SaludableOmaha, a health brand that stands for healthy attitude, balance, leadership and energy, and they are prepared to change the world – or at least a small part of it in South Omaha.

The group is really a public health research study that hopes to demonstrate how youth advocacy and social marketing can shift the overall climate of childhood obesity in the Latino community. The study blends the creative process with the empirical.

Terry Huang, Ph.D., professor and chairman of health promotion and social and behavioral health at UNMC's College

of Public Health, directs the study, which is funded by a \$200,000 two-year grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). The project is in partnership with Omaha South High and the South Omaha Community Care Council.

"SaludableOmaha is a social movement that seeks to empower individuals and families to adopt a healthier lifestyle and, at the same time, create a community and business environment that is more conducive to healthy living," Dr. Huang said.

To achieve his goal, Dr. Huang enlisted the help of British documentary film writer and director Catherine Stewart, who has worked with the BBC and Disney HIT! Entertainment and has focused on obesity awareness the past three years. Earlier this year, she worked with Dr. Huang to enlist students into the project, train them to be advocates and film their progress.

Since February, the group has painted a mural, held a neighborhood fiesta, hosted a dinner for community leaders, developed low fat/low sugar recipes for a cookbook,

built a website and wrote and began filming a documentary and public service announcements about living healthier.

"First, we had to find the cultural connections and barriers before we determined a message," Stewart said.

One of the challenges was to help students find their voice – to empower them to express their own ideas, Stewart said. "They learned to take ownership, pride and responsibility in this project and they've done a beautiful job."

The students, all but one from South High School, were divided into teams based on their talents. With specific tasks of advertising, marketing and community advocacy, the project took on the structure of a public relations agency.

Although health messages had to be sexy, humorous and cool to appeal to their peers, the 14- to 18-year-olds clearly understood the seriousness of their mission. Several members of the group have struggled with weight issues or have family members with health problems related to obesity. They aren't alone.

Award-winning chef Grace Diaz is in charge of the cookbook project, which offers healthy recipes of traditional Hispanic foods. Garret Geist, a cameraman for Golden Toad Productions in Omaha, films Diaz for the documentary.



One of the tasty meals created for the cookbook uses lean meat and vegetables.



One-fourth of Nebraskans are obese, making the state the 20th heaviest in the nation. Obesity is one of the most important factors in the development of diabetes and heart disease, Dr. Huang said.

The RWJF reports that adult obesity rates among Latinos are above 35 percent in four states (Mississippi, North Dakota, South Carolina and Texas) and at least 30 percent in 23 states. Almost 50 percent of Latino children are overweight.


SaludableOmaha students targeted restaurants and supermarkets to enact healthy changes in their business. Sponsors receive certificates to display and are featured on the website.

“If a business makes at least one policy change, such as putting calories on the menu, they receive an activist award,” Dr. Huang said. Two or more policy changes lead to a super activist award and possibly a feature in the documentary.

Individual supporters also are encouraged to join the movement online to create the demand for change.

The project started when Dr. Huang returned to academia after five years at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), where he was senior advisor for obesity research. He wanted to try a new approach in public health research — systems science — which seeks to connect individual health promotion to environmental and policy interventions to create the synergy for community or social change.

“This approach looks at all the contributors to childhood obesity and seeks out effective and sustainable solutions,” he said. “We involve people from the grassroots to community leaders.

“We have to make healthy lifestyles the easy default in everyday life but we also have to create the demand for a healthy community,” he said. “That’s the only way to have a strategy that is long-term and effective in combating obesity.” 

Small changes look like this:

- Change food recipes — bake instead of fry
- Drain fat off meat
- Use fresh ingredients
- Use olive oil instead of butter or other vegetable oil
- Substitute fresh fruit and vegetables
- Use low fat alternatives for butter, cheese and sour cream
- Buy whole-grain bread or cereal
- Use leaner meats such as chicken and turkey (without skin)
- More tips and information at: saludableomaha.com



Read how SaludableOmaha has changed the lives of four teens. See more photos of the students. unmc.edu/connect



The mural on the side of a building in south Omaha provided a challenge to Michael Gray and two other artists. The mural depicts a spirit, surrounded by an assortment of fruits and vegetables, pulling a person out of a sea of unhealthy foods.

